

INTRODUCTION TO MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

SECTION

1



UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

CHAPTER

1

In April 2007 the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released its study of Americans' knowledge of national public affairs. Much of what the researchers discovered seemed fairly logical—better-educated people knew more about public affairs than did those with less education; people who had higher household incomes were better informed than those with lower incomes; registered voters knew more than those not registered to vote; those who “enjoyed keeping up with the news” had more public affairs knowledge than those who did not; people who used a greater variety of news sources were better informed; there was little difference in knowledge between members of different political parties; the same was true for residents of different parts of the country. Some of their results were a little more surprising (or at least, a bit more difficult to explain). For example, there was a small but significant drop-off in knowledge of national affairs between 1989 and 2007 regardless of educational level, and there were large differences in public affairs knowledge between men and women and white and African American citizens.

The finding, however, that generated the most media and public commentary was the difference in knowledge of current events between audience members for various “news sources.” There was a tie for “best-informed media consumer” between regular newspaper readers and regular viewers of the satiric news programs *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, both on cable television channel Comedy Central. In third place was the audience for public television's *Lehrer News Hour*. In very last place were regular viewers of *Fox News*.

The report's authors expressed their surprise at the results, “Since the late 1980s, the emergence of 24-hour cable news as a dominant news source and the explosive growth of the Internet have led to major changes in the American

public’s news habits,” they wrote. “But . . . the coaxial and digital revolutions and attendant changes in news audience behaviors have had little impact on how much Americans know about national and international affairs” (Pew Research, 2007, p. 1). But why were they surprised? They were surprised because they had some preformed idea or assumption about the relationship between the huge amount of media available to people and their willingness and ability to keep up with public affairs. Surely they would have considered not only the many available news sources but the environment in which their survey was conducted—the War in Iraq was entering its fourth, increasingly controversial year; about fifteen national politicians from both political parties had already announced their intentions to run for president in the November 2008 elections; high-profile scandals plagued the Justice Department, the Veterans Administration’s care of wounded veterans, and the World Bank. Which of the results surprised you? Did you find the “logical” findings logical? The “surprising” findings surprising? Why would there be, in this time in our country’s social history, large discrepancies in public affairs knowledge between the different genders and different races? Why would viewers of fake TV news shows know more than those of “legitimate” television news programs? Your answers to these questions are naturally based on *your* preformed ideas or assumptions about the relationship between people, their media use, and their knowledge of the news. You no doubt take into consideration factors such as what was going on in the world at the time of the survey, differences in expectations of the media in light of people’s ages, socioeconomic levels, and other individual differences. You might also have wondered if the relationship between preferred news source and knowledge can be looked at in the reverse—that is, reading the newspaper and watching *The Daily Show* might not make people better informed; instead, better-informed individuals just might prefer to read the newspaper or watch satirical news programs specifically because this content is more fun to read and watch if people already know more.

The Pew researchers had their ideas or assumptions; so do you. These ideas and assumptions can—and often do—become the bases for something more formal, more systematic—theories. That formality, that systematic understanding, comes from the social sciences. When these social scientific theories involve relationships between media and the people and societies that use them, they are theories of mass communication.

OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we will discuss just what separates an idea or an assumption from a theory. We will examine the field of social science and the theories it spawns—specifically mass communication theories. We’ll look at some of the difficulties faced by those who attempt to systematically study human behavior and the particular problems encountered when the issue is human behavior *and* the mass media. We’ll see, too, that when the issue is mass communication, the definition of *social science* can be quite flexible. We’ll define theory and offer several classifications of communication theory and mass communication theory. Most important, we will try to convince you that the difficulties that seem to surround the development and study of mass communication theory aren’t really difficulties at all: rather

they are challenges that make the study of mass communication theory interesting and exciting. As John D. Barrow (1998, p. 3) wrote, “A world that [is] simple enough to be fully known would be too simple to contain conscious observers who might know it.”

DEFINING AND REDEFINING MASS COMMUNICATION

In recent decades, the number and variety of mass communication theories have steadily increased. Media theory has emerged as a more or less independent body of thought in both the social science and humanistic literatures. This book is intended as a guide to this diverse and sometimes contradictory thinking. You will find ideas developed by scholars in every area of the social sciences, from history and anthropology to sociology and psychology. Ideas have also been drawn from the humanities, especially from philosophy and literary analysis. The resulting ferment of ideas is both challenging and heuristic. These theories provide the raw materials for constructing even more useful and powerful theoretical perspectives.

If you are looking for a concise, definitive definition of theory, you won't find it in this book. We have avoided narrow definitions of theory in favor of an inclusive approach that finds value in most systematic, scholarly efforts to make sense of media and their role in society. We have included recent theories that some contemporary researchers consider unscientific. Some of the theories reviewed are **grand**; they try to explain entire media systems and their role in society. Others are very small and provide narrower insight into specific uses or effects of media. Our selection of theories for inclusion in this book is based partly on their enduring historical importance and partly on their potential to contribute to future scholarship. This process is necessarily subjective and is based on our own understanding of mass communication. Our consideration of contemporary perspectives is focused on those that illustrate enduring or innovative conceptualizations. But before we embark on that consideration, we need to offer definitions of some important concepts.

grand theory

Theory designed to describe and explain all aspects of a given phenomenon

mass communication

When a source, typically an organization, employs a technology as a medium to communicate with a large audience

Listserv

Software employed to manage online mailing lists, bulletin boards, or discussion groups that cover a variety of subjects

When an organization employs a technology as a medium to communicate with a large audience, **mass communication** is said to have occurred. The professionals at the *New York Times* (an organization) use printing presses and the newspaper (technology and medium) to reach their readers (a large audience). The writers, producers, filmmakers, and other professionals at the Cartoon Network use various audio and video technologies, satellites, cable television, and home receivers to communicate with their audience. Warner Brothers places ads in magazines to tell readers what movies it is releasing.

But as you no doubt know—and as you'll be reminded constantly throughout this text—the mass communication environment is changing. When you receive a piece of direct-mail advertising addressed to you by name, and in which your name is used throughout, you are an audience of one—not the large audience envisioned in traditional notions of mass communication. When you sit at your computer and send an e-mail to twenty thousand people who have signed on to a **Listserv** dedicated to a particular subject, you are obviously communicating with a large audience, but you are not an organization in the sense of a newspaper, cable television network, or movie studio. The availability of lightweight, portable,

inexpensive video equipment combined with the development of easy-to-use Internet video sites like YouTube makes it possible for an “everyday” person like you to be a television writer and producer, reaching audiences numbering in the tens of millions. People attracted to many websites and cable channels can hardly be considered *mass* audiences when compared with the numbers that tune in to a network television program such as *Survivor* or that go to a movie like *Spider-Man 3*.

Although most theories we will study in this text were developed before our modern communications revolution, they are not useless or outmoded. But we must remember that much has changed in how people use technologies to communicate. One useful way to do this is to think of **mediated communication** as existing on a continuum that stretches from **interpersonal communication** at one end to traditional forms of mass communication at the other. Where different media fall along this continuum depends on the amount of control and involvement people have in the communication process. The telephone, for example (the phone as traditionally understood—not the one you might own that has Internet access, a built-in video camera, and three decades’ worth of family photos!), sits at one end. It is obviously a communication technology, but one that is most typical of interpersonal communication—at most, a very few people can be involved in communicating at any given time, and they have a great deal of involvement with and control over that communication—the conversation is theirs, and they determine its content. A big-budget Hollywood movie or a network telecast of the Super Bowl sits at the opposite pole. Viewers have limited control over the communication that occurs. Certainly, people can apply idiosyncratic interpretations to the content before them, and they can choose to direct however much attention they wish to the screen. They can choose to actively seek meaning from media content, or they can choose to passively decode it. But their control and involvement cannot directly alter the content of the messages being transmitted. Message content is centrally controlled by media organizations.

As you’ll see when we examine the more contemporary mass communication theories, the new communication technologies are rapidly filling in the middle of the continuum between the telephone and television. Suddenly, media consumers have the power to alter message content if they are willing to invest the time and have the necessary resources. Audiences can be *active* in ways that are hard to anticipate, and the consequences of this activity may not be understood for decades to come. The instant popularity of downloading music from the Internet demonstrates that a generation of young adults is willing to invest the time, acquire the skills, and purchase the technology necessary to take greater control over the music they consume. We have seen this process play out even more recently, and possibly even more dramatically, with the overnight success of video and social networking websites like YouTube and MySpace, and we’ll surely see it repeated again and again as we actively engage the technologies that allow us to create and control media content that is important to us. As this happens, there will be profound consequences for our personal lives, the media industries, and the larger social world. As communication theorists Steven Chaffee and Miriam Metzger (2001, p. 369) explain, “Contemporary media allow for a greater quantity of information transmission and retrieval, place more control over both content creation and selection in the hands of their users, and do so with less cost to the average consumer.”

mediated communication
Communication between a few or many people that employs a technology as a medium

interpersonal communication
Communication between two or a few people, typically face-to-face

SCIENCE AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

Ours is a society that generally respects and believes its scientists. Science is one of the fundamental reasons why we enjoy our admirable standard of living and have a growing understanding of the world around us. But not all scientists are revered equally. British astronomer and philosopher John D. Barrow opened his 1998 book, *Impossibility: The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits*, with this observation on the value of science and its practitioners:

Bookshelves are stuffed with volumes that expound the successes of the mind and the silicon chip. We expect science to tell us what can be done and what is to be done. Governments look to scientists to improve the quality of life and safeguard us from earlier “improvements.” Futurologists see no limit to human inquiry, while social scientists see no end to the raft of problems it spawns. (Barrow, 1998, p. 1)

The physical *scientists* and engineers are the dreamers, the fixers, the guardians. They have sent us photos of stars aborning, detailed the inner workings of the atom, and invented the microwave oven, the World Wide Web, and cell phones that take and send video. *Social scientists* are the naysayers, the Grinches of the world. They tell us that television is corrupting us, modern political campaigning has rendered us too cynical to participate meaningfully in our democracy, and parents rely too heavily on television to babysit their kids. Or, as technology writer David Brooks (2002, p. 22) reminds us, “A survey of the social science of the past century shows it to be, by and large, an insanelly pessimistic field.” We tend to readily accept most of the good findings of Barrow’s *scientists*—The universe is continually expanding? Of course. The existence of quarks? Naturally—while we are more suspicious of those of the *social scientists*—School uniforms improve pupil discipline? Not for my kid! Playing with Barbies destroys little girls’ self-esteem? I don’t think so! Videogames teach violence? That’s so Twentieth Century!

Why does our society seem to have greater difficulty accepting the theories and findings of **social scientists**, those who apply logic and observation—that is, science—to the understanding of the social, rather than the physical world? Why do we have more trust in the people who wield telescopes and microscopes to probe the breadth of the universe and the depth of human cells but skepticism about the tools used by social observers to probe the breadth of culture or the depth of human experience?

At the center of our society’s occasional reluctance to accept the theories of the social scientists is the *logic of causality*. We readily understand this logic. You’ve no doubt had it explained to you when taking high school physics or chemistry, so we’ll use a simple example from those classes: boiling water. If we (or our representatives, the scientists) can manipulate an independent variable (heat) and produce the same effect (boiling at 100 degrees centigrade) under the same conditions (sea level) every time, then a **causal relationship** has been established. Heating water at sea level to 100 degrees will cause water to boil. No matter how many times you heat beakers of water at sea level, they will all boil at 100 degrees. Lower the heat; the water does not boil. Heat it at the top of Mount Everest; it boils at lower temperatures. Go back to sea level (or alter the atmospheric pressure in a laboratory test); it boils at 100 degrees. Repeated observation under controlled

social scientists

Scientists who examine relationships among phenomena in the human or social world

causality

When a given factor influences another, even by way of an intervening variable

causal relationship

When the alterations in a particular variable under specific conditions always produces the same effect in another variable

scientific method

A search for truth through accurate observation and interpretation of fact

hypothesis

A testable prediction about some event

conditions—we even have a name for this, the **scientific method**, and there are many definitions for it. Here is a small sample:

1. “A means whereby insight into an undiscovered truth is sought by (1) identifying the problem that defines the goal of the quest, (2) gathering data with the hope of resolving the problem, (3) positing a **hypothesis** both as a logical means of locating the data and as an aid to resolving the problem, and (4) empirically testing the hypothesis by processing and interpreting the data to see whether the interpretation of them will resolve the question that initiated the research” (Leedy, 1997, pp. 94–95).
2. “A set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena” (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 9).
3. “A method . . . by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect. . . . The method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man [*sic*] shall be the same. Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis . . . is this: There are real things whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them” (Peirce, 1955, p. 18).

Throughout the last century and into this one, some social researchers have tried to apply the scientific method to the study of human behavior and society. As you’ll soon see, an Austrian immigrant to the United States, Paul Lazarsfeld, was an important advocate of applying social research methods to the study of mass media. But although the essential logic of the scientific method is quite simple, its application in the social (rather than physical) world can be more complicated.

Take, for example, the much-discussed issue of press coverage of political campaigns and its impact on voter turnout. We know that more media attention is paid to elections than ever before. Today, television permits continual eyewitness coverage of candidate activity. Mobile vans trail candidates and beam stories off satellites so that local television stations can air their own coverage. The Internet and web offer instant access to candidates, their ideas, and those of their opponents. Yet, despite advances in media technology and innovations in campaign coverage, voter participation in the United States remains woefully low (and as the Pew Research Center survey that opened this chapter indicates, so, too, does knowledge of public affairs). Should we assume that media campaign coverage has caused voting to decline? This is an assertion that some mass communication observers might be quick to make. But would they be right? How could or should we verify whether this assertion is valid?

As we shall see, the pioneers of mass communication research faced this situation during the 1930s. There were precious few scientific studies of, but many bold assertions about, the bad effects of mass media. A small number of social scientists began to argue that these claims should not be accepted before making **empirical** observations that could either support them or permit them to be rejected. While these early researchers often shared the widely held view that media were powerful, they believed that the scientific method might be used to harness this power to avoid negative effects like juvenile delinquency and produce positive effects such as

empirical

Capable of being verified or disproved by observation

promoting Americans' trust in their own democratic political system while subverting the appeal of totalitarian propaganda. In this way, scientific research would allow media to be a force for good in shaping the social world.

These researchers faced many problems, however, in applying the scientific method to the study of mass communication. How can there be repeated observations? No two audiences, never mind any two individuals, who see political coverage are the same. No two elections are the same. Even if a scientist conducted the same experiment on the same people repeatedly (showing them, for example, the same excerpts of coverage and then asking them if and how they might vote), these people would now be different each additional time because they would have had a new set of experiences (participation in the study).

How can there be control over conditions that might influence observed effects? Who can control what people watch, read, or listen to, or to whom they talk, not to mention what they have learned about voting and civic responsibility in school, family, and church? One solution is to put them in a laboratory and limit what they watch and learn. But people don't grow up in laboratories or watch television with the types of strangers they meet in a laboratory experiment. They don't consume media messages hooked to galvanic skin response devices or scanned by machines that track their eye movements. And unlike atoms under study, people can and sometimes do change their behaviors as a result of the social scientists' findings, which further confounds claims of causality. And there is another problem. Powerful media effects rarely happen as a result of exposure to a few messages in a short amount of time. Effects take place slowly, over long periods of time. At any moment, nothing may seem to be happening.

This implementation of the scientific method is difficult for those studying the social world for four reasons:

1. **Most of the significant and interesting forms of human behavior are quite difficult to measure.** We can easily measure the temperature at which water boils. With ingenious and complex technology, we can even measure the weight of an atom or the speed at which the universe is expanding. But how do we measure something like civic duty? Should we count the incidence of voting? Maybe a person's decision not to vote is her personal expression of that duty. Try something a little easier, like measuring aggression in a television violence study. Can aggression be measured by counting how many times a child hits a rubber doll? Is gossiping about a neighbor an aggressive act? How do we measure an attitude (a predisposition to do something rather than an observable action)? What is three pounds of tendency to hold conservative political views or sixteen point seven millimeters of patriotism?

2. **Human behavior is exceedingly complex.** Human behavior does not easily lend itself to causal description. It is easy to identify a single factor that causes water to boil. But it has proved impossible to isolate single factors that serve as the exclusive cause of important actions of human behavior. Human behavior may simply be too complex to allow scientists to ever fully untangle the different factors that combine to cause observable actions. We can easily control the heat and atmospheric pressure in our boiling experiment. We can relatively easily control the elements in a chemistry experiment. But if we want to develop a theory of the influence of mediated communication on political campaigns, how do we control

which forms of media people choose to use? How do we control the amount of attention they pay to specific types of news? How do we measure how well or poorly they comprehend what they consume? How do we take into account factors that influenced people long before we started our research? For example, how do we measure the type and amount of political socialization produced by parents, schools, or peers? All these things (not to mention countless others) will influence the relationship between people's use of media and their behavior in an election. How can we be sure what *caused* what? Voting might have declined even more precipitously without media coverage. Remember, the very same factors that lead one person to vote might lead another to stay home.

3. **Humans have goals and are self-reflexive.** We do not always behave in response to something that has happened; very often we act in response to something we hope or expect will happen. Moreover, we constantly revise our goals and make highly subjective determinations about their potential for success or failure. Water boils *after* the application of heat. It doesn't think about boiling. It doesn't begin to experience boiling and then decide that it doesn't like the experience. We think about our actions and inactions; we reflect on our values, beliefs, and attitudes. Water doesn't develop attitudes against boiling that lead it to misperceive the amount of heat it is experiencing. It stops boiling when the heat is removed. It doesn't think about stopping or have trouble making up its mind. It doesn't have friends who tell it that boiling is fun and should be continued even when there is insufficient heat. But people do think about their actions, and they frequently make these actions contingent on their expectations that something will happen. Do you generally go to a particular film only because you saw a single ad for it (simple causal relationship) or because, although never having seen any promotional material for it, you anticipate a good time—you go to the movie to make meaning, to create a specific kind of experience for yourself. For example, in one famous television violence study we'll discuss later (Chapter 7), young boys behaved aggressively, not because they had seen violent television shows, but because they *wanted* to see those programs. They were frustrated when experimenters denied them the ability to watch programs they liked.

4. **The simple notion of causality is sometimes troubling when it is applied to ourselves.** We have no trouble accepting that heat causes water to boil at 100 degrees centigrade at sea level; we relish such causal statements in the physical world. We want to know how things work, what makes things happen. As much as we might like to be thrilled by horror movies or science fiction films in which physical laws are continually violated, we trust the operation of these laws in our daily lives. But we often resent causal statements when they are applied to ourselves. We can't see the expanding universe or the breakup of the water molecule at the boiling point, so we are willing to accept the next best thing, the word of an objective expert, that is, a scientist. But we can see ourselves reading the paper and not voting and going to a movie and choosing a brand-name pair of slacks and learning about people from lands we've never visited. Why do we need experts telling us about ourselves or explaining to us why we do things? We're not so easily influenced by media, we say. But ironically, most of us are convinced that other people are much more likely to be influenced by media (the **third-person effect**; Tewksbury, Moy, and Weis, 2004). So although we don't need to be protected from media influence,

third-person effect

The idea that “media affect others, but not me”

others might. We are our own men and women—independent, freethinking individuals. We weren't affected by those McDonald's ads; we simply bought that Big Mac, fries, and a large Coke because, darn it, we deserved a break today. And after all, we did need to eat something and the McDonald's did happen to be right on the way back to the dorm.

DEFINING THEORY

theory

Any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience

Scientists, physical or social (however narrowly or broadly defined), deal in **theory**. “Theories are stories about how and why events occur . . . Scientific theories begin with the assumption that the universe, including the social universe created by acting human beings, reveals certain basic and fundamental properties and processes that explain the ebb and flow of events in specific processes” (Turner, 1998, p. 1). Theory has numerous other definitions. John Bowers and John Courtright (1984, p. 13) offered a traditionally scientific definition: “Theories . . . are sets of statements asserting relationships among classes of variables.” Kenneth Bailey’s (1982, p. 39) conception of theory accepts a wider array of ways to understand the social world: “Explanations and predictions of social phenomena . . . relating the subject of interest . . . to some other phenomena.”

Our definition, though, will be drawn from a synthesis of two even more generous views of theory. Assuming that there are a number of different ways to understand how communication functions in our complex world, Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss (2008, p. 14) defined theory as “any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience.” Emory Griffin (1994, p. 34) also takes this broader view, writing that a theory is an idea “that explains an event or behavior. It brings clarity to an otherwise jumbled situation; it draws order out of chaos . . . [It] synthesizes the data, focuses our attention on what’s crucial, and helps us ignore that which makes little difference.” These latter two writers are acknowledging an important reality of communication and mass communication theories: There are a lot of them, the questions they produce are testable to varying degrees, they are situationally based, and they sometimes seem contradictory and chaotic. As communication theorist Katherine Miller (2005, pp. 22–23) explained, “Different schools of thought will define *theory* in different ways depending on the needs of the theorist and on beliefs about the social world and the nature of knowledge.” Scholars have identified four major categories of communication theory—(1) postpositivism, (2) hermeneutic theory, (3) critical theory, and (4) normative theory—and although they “share a commitment to an increased understanding of social and communicative life and a value for high-quality scholarship” (Miller, 2005, p. 32), they differ in

ontology

The nature of reality, what is knowable

epistemology

How knowledge is created and expanded

axiology

The proper role of values in research and theory building

- their goals
- their view of the nature of reality, what is knowable—their **ontology**
- their view of how knowledge is created and expanded—their **epistemology**
- their view of the proper role of values in research and theory building—their **axiology**

These differences not only define the different types of theory, but help make it obvious why the definition of *social science* in mass communication theory is necessarily flexible.

POSTPOSITIVIST THEORY

postpositivist theory

Theory based on empirical observation guided by the scientific method

When communication researchers first wanted to systematically study the social world, they turned to the physical sciences for their model. Those in the physical sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, and so on) believed in *positivism*, the idea that knowledge could be gained only through empirical, observable, measurable phenomena examined through the scientific method. But as we saw earlier in this chapter, people are not beakers of water. As a result, social scientists committed to the scientific method practice **postpositivist theory**, theory based on empirical observation guided by the scientific method, but recognizing that humans and human behavior are not as constant as elements of the physical world.

The goals of postpositivist theory are explanation, prediction, and control (and in this you can see the connection between this kind of social science and the physical sciences). Researchers who want to explain the operation of political advertising, predict which commercials will be most effective, and control the voting behavior of targeted citizens would, of necessity, rely on postpositivist theory. Its ontology accepts that the world, even the social world, exists apart from our perceptions of it; human behavior is sufficiently predictable to be studied systematically. (Postpositivists do, however, believe that the social world does have more variation than the physical world; for example, the names we give to things define them and our reaction to them—hence the *post* of postpositivism). Its epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced through the systematic, logical search for regularities and causal relationships employing the scientific method. And it is this scientific method that defines postpositivism's axiology—the objectivity inherent in the application of the scientific method keeps researchers' and theorists' values out of the search for knowledge (as much as is possible). Postpositivist communication theory, then, is theory developed through a system of inquiry that resembles as much as possible the rules and practices of what we traditionally understand as science.

HERMENEUTIC THEORY

hermeneutic theory

The study of understanding, especially by interpreting action and text

But many communication theorists do not want to explain, predict, and control social behavior. Their goal is to *understand* how and why that behavior occurs in the social world. This **hermeneutic theory** is the study of understanding, especially through the systematic interpretation of actions or texts. Hermeneutics originally began as the study or interpretation of the Bible and other sacred works. As it evolved over the last two centuries, it maintained its commitment to the examination of “objectifications of the mind” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 236), or what Miller calls “social creations” (2005, p. 52). Just as the Bible was the “objectification” of early Christian culture, and those who wanted to understand that culture would study that text, most modern applications of hermeneutics are likewise focused on understanding the culture of the users of a specific text.

social hermeneutics
Theory seeking to understand how those in an observed social situation interpret their own lot in that situation

text
Any product of social interaction that serves as a source of understanding

There are different forms of hermeneutic theory. For example, **social hermeneutics** has as its goal the understanding of how those in an observed social situation interpret their own lot in that situation. As ethnographer Michael Moerman (1992, p. 23) explained, social hermeneutic theory tries to understand how events “in the alien world make sense to the aliens, how their way of life coheres and has meaning and value for the people who live it.” Another branch of hermeneutics looks for hidden or deep meaning in people’s interpretation of different symbol systems—for example, in media texts. As you might have guessed from these descriptions, hermeneutic theory is sometimes referred to as *interpretive theory*. Another important idea embedded in these descriptions is that any **text**, any product of social interaction—a movie, the president’s State of the Union Address, a love letter, a conversation between soap opera hero and heroine—can be a source of understanding.

The ontology of hermeneutic theory says that there is no truly “real,” measurable social reality. Instead, “reality cannot be understood except through a consideration of the mental and social processes that are continually constructing that reality” (Miller, 2005, p. 57). As such, what is knowable is based on people’s interpretation of that which they know. This means that hermeneutic theory’s epistemology, how knowledge is advanced, relies on the subjective interaction between the observer (the researcher or theorist) and his or her community. Put another way, knowledge is local; that is, it is specific to the interaction of the knower and the known. Naturally, then, the axiology of hermeneutic theory embraces, rather than limits, the influence of researcher and theorist values. Personal and professional values, according to Katherine Miller, are a “lens through which social phenomena are observed” (2005, p. 58). A researcher interested in understanding teens’ interpretations of social networking websites like Facebook or one curious about meaning-making that occurs in the exchange of information among teen fans of an online simulation game would rely on hermeneutic theory.

CRITICAL THEORY

critical theory
Theory seeking emancipation and change in a dominant social order

There are still other scholars who do not want explanation, prediction, and control of the social world. Nor do they seek understanding of the social world as the ultimate goal for their work. They start from the assumption that some aspects of the social world are deeply flawed and in need of transformation. Their aim is to gain knowledge of that social world so they can change it. This goal is inherently political because it challenges existing ways of organizing the social world and the people and institutions that exercise power in it. **Critical theory** is openly political (therefore its axiology is aggressively value-laden). It assumes that by reorganizing society, we can give priority to the most important human values. Critical theorists study inequality and oppression. Their theories do more than observe, describe, or interpret; they criticize. Critical theories “are concerned with how power, oppression, and privilege are the products of certain forms of communication throughout society” (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008, p. 45) and how those forms of communication perpetuate domination of one group over another. Critical theory’s epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced only when it serves to free people and

Thinking About Theory**TRUE VALUES: A DEEPER LOOK AT AXIOLOGY**

As we've seen, different communication theorists deal differently with the role of values in the construction of their ideas. Inasmuch as they model their research on that of those who study the physical world, postpositivists would ideally like to eliminate values from their inquiry. But they know they can't, so objectivity becomes their regulatory ideal; that is, they rely on the scientific method to reduce the impact of values on their work as much as possible. They also distinguish between two types of values in their work. Postpositivists cherish **epistemic values**—they value high standards in the conduct of research and development of theory. But they also confront **nonepistemic values**—the place of emotion, morals, and ethics in research and theory development. There is little debate about the former among postpositivists—who wouldn't want high standards of performance? But what about emotions, morals, and ethics? Why, for example, would researchers want to study media violence? Certainly they believe a relationship exists between media consumption and human behavior on some level. But what if an individual theorist strongly believes in the eradication of all violence on children's television because of her own son's problems with bullies at school? How hard should she work to ignore her personal feelings in her research and interpretation of her findings? Should she examine some other aspect of mass communication to ensure greater objectivity? But why should anybody have to study something that he or she has no feeling about?

Interpretive theorists, even though they more readily accept the role of values in their work than do postpositivists, also wrestle with the proper application of those values. Accepting the impossibility of separating values from research and theory development, interpretive theorists identify two ends of a continuum. Those who wish to minimize the impact of their personal values on their work **bracket** their values; that is, they recognize them, set them aside by figuratively putting them in brackets, and then do their work. At the other end

of the continuum are those who openly celebrate their values and consciously inject them into their work. In truth, most interpretive researchers and theorists fall somewhere in the middle. If you are really thinking about theory, though, you would have asked, "But if an interpretive theorist openly celebrates his or her values and injects them into the research or theory development, hasn't she moved into critical theory?" And you would be correct, because it is hard to conceive of someone willing to inject personal values into social research and theory who did not want, at the very least, to advance those values. And in advancing those values, the status quo would be altered—hence, critical theory.

Critical and normative theorists, in their open embrace of values, face fewer questions about objectivity than do other theorists. But they, like all social researchers and theorists, must employ high epistemic values. Critical theorists advocate change; normative theorists advocate media striving to meet a social system's stated ideals of operation. These open articulations of nonepistemic values, however, do not excuse sloppy data gathering or improper data analysis.

What should be clear is that all involved in the serious study of human life must maintain the highest standards of inquiry *within the conventions* of their research and theory development communities. Given that, which axiology do you find most compatible with your way of thinking about human behavior? Should you someday become a mass communication researcher or theorist, which set of values do you think would prove most valuable in guiding your efforts?

epistemic values High standards in the conduct of research and theory development

nonepistemic values The place of emotion, morals, and ethics in research and theory development

bracket In interpretive theory, setting values aside

structure

In critical theory, the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs

agency

In critical theory, how humans behave and interact within the structure

dialectic

In critical theory, the ongoing struggle between agency and structure

communities from the influence of those more powerful than themselves. Its ontology, however, is a bit more complex.

According to critical theory, what is real, what is knowable, in the social world is the product of the interaction between **structure** (the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs) and **agency** (how humans behave and interact in that world). Reality, then, to critical theorists, is constantly being shaped and reshaped by the **dialectic** (the ongoing struggle or debate) between the two. When elites control the struggle, they define reality (in other words, their control of the structure defines people's realities). When people are emancipated, *they* define reality through their behaviors and interactions (agency). Researchers and theorists interested in the decline (and restoration) of the power of the labor movement in industrialized nations or those interested in limiting the contribution of children's advertising to the nation's growing consumerism would rely on critical theory. Some critical theorists are quite troubled by what they view as the uncontrolled exercise of capitalist corporate power around the world. They see media as an essential tool employed by corporate elites to constrain how people view their social world and to limit their agency in it.

NORMATIVE THEORY

Social theorists see postpositivist and hermeneutic theory as *representational*. That is, they are articulations—word pictures—of some other realities (for postpositivists, those representations are generalizable across similar realities, and for interpretive theorists, these representations are local and specific). Critical theory is *nonrepresentational*. Its goal is to *change* existing realities.

There is another type of theory, however. It may be applied to any form of communication but is most often applied to *mass* communication. Its aim is neither the representation nor the reformation of reality. Instead, its goal is to set an ideal standard against which the operation of a given media system can be judged. A **normative media theory** explains how a media system *should* operate in order to conform to or realize a set of ideal social values. As such, its ontology argues that what is known is situational (or, like interpretive theory, local). In other words, what is real or knowable about a media system is real or knowable only for the specific social system in which that system exists. Its epistemology, how knowledge is developed and advanced, is based in *comparative analysis*—we can only judge (and therefore understand) the worth of a given media system in comparison to the ideal espoused by the particular social system in which it operates. Finally, normative theory's axiology is, by definition, value-laden. Study of a media system or parts of a media system is undertaken in the explicit belief that there is an ideal mode of operation based in the values of the social system. Theorists interested in the press's role in a democracy would most likely employ normative theory, as would those examining the operation of the media in an Islamic republic or an authoritarian state. Problems arise if media systems based on one normative theory are evaluated according to the norms or ideals of another normative theory. Chapter 5 is devoted in its entirety to normative theory. You can more deeply investigate the role of values in the four broad categories of theory we've discussed when reading the box entitled "True Values: A Deeper Look at Axiology."

normative media theory

Theory explaining how a media system should operate in order to conform to or realize a set of ideal social values

EVALUATING THEORY

French philosopher André Gide wrote, “No theory is good unless it permits, not rest, but the greatest work. No theory is good except on condition that one uses it to go on beyond” (quoted in Andrews, Biggs, and Seidel, 1996, p. 66). In other words, good theory pushes, advances, improves the social world. There are some specific ways, however, to judge the value of the many theories we will study in this book.

When evaluating postpositivist theory, we need to ask these questions:

1. How well does it explain the event, behavior, or relationship of interest?
2. How well does it predict future events, behaviors, or relationships?
3. How testable is it? In other words, is it specific enough in its assertions that it can be systematically supported or rejected based on empirical observation?
4. How parsimonious is it? In other words, is it the simplest explanation of the phenomenon in question as possible? Some call this elegance. Keep in mind that communication theories generally tend to lack parsimony. In fact, one of the reasons many social scientists avoid the study of communication is that communication phenomena are hard to explain parsimoniously.
5. How practical or useful is it? If the goals of postpositivist theory are explanation, prediction, and control, how much assistance toward these ends is provided by the theory?

When evaluating hermeneutic theory, we need to ask these questions:

1. How much new or fresh insight into the event, behavior, or relationship of interest does it offer? In other words, how much does it advance our understanding?
2. How well does it clarify the values inherent in the interpretation, not only those embedded in the phenomenon of interest, but those of the researcher or theorist?
3. How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community also investigating the phenomenon of interest?
4. How much aesthetic appeal does it have? In other words, does it enthuse or inspire its adherents?

When evaluating critical theory, we need to ask the same questions we do of hermeneutic theory, but we must add a fifth:

5. How useful is the critique of the status quo? In other words, does it provide enough understanding of elite power so that power can be effectively challenged? Does the theory enable individuals to oppose elite definitions of the social world?

When evaluating normative theory, we need to ask the following questions:

1. How stable and definitive are the ideal standards of operation against which the media system (or its parts) under study will be measured?

2. What, and how powerful, are the economic, social, cultural, and political realities surrounding the actual operation of a system (or its parts) that must be considered in evaluating that performance?
3. How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community also investigating a specific media system (or its parts)?

FLEXIBLE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Now that you've been introduced to the four broad categories of social scientific theory, you might have guessed another reason that those who study the social world often don't get the respect accorded their physical science colleagues. Sociologist Kenneth Bailey (1982, p. 5) wrote, "To this day you will find within social science both those who think of themselves as scientists in the strictest sense of the word and those with a more subjective approach to the study of society, who see themselves more as humanists than as scientists." In other words, and as you've just seen, not all who call themselves social scientists adhere to the same standards for conducting research or accepting evidence. But complicating matters even more is the fact that social science researchers and theorists often blend (or mix and match) categories as they do their work. To some observers, especially committed postpositivists, this seems unsystematic. It also generates disagreement among social scientists, not about the issue under examination, say the influence of video violence on children's behavior, but about the appropriateness of the methods used, the value of the evidence obtained, or the influence of values on the work (that is, its ontology, epistemology, and axiology).

You'll see these disagreements throughout this text and how they have shaped the discipline's thinking over the decades. For now, though, let's take this example, the impact of video violence, and see how different social scientists might approach it. Do you believe that watching televised or videogame violence can cause kids to act more aggressively? Surely this must be an easier thing to demonstrate than the existence of an ever-expanding universe. This link has been theorized ever since the first silent-movie hero slugged the first silent-movie villain. What is the most useful way to study the complex relationship between this specific form of media content and those who consume it? Maybe we could put two groups of children, some of whom had seen a violent cartoon and some who had not, in a room and count the number of times each engaged in some form of violent play. Maybe we could examine the disciplinary records of two schools, one where children had ready access to television at home and one where there was no television allowed. Maybe we could take a three-month position as a teacher's aide in a preschool and record the interaction between the children, television, and one another. Perhaps we could interview heavy and light television viewers and frequent and infrequent game players. Maybe the best way is to ignore what is going on with specific individuals and classrooms and focus our research on how television programs and videogames present violence (Who metes it out? Who is on the receiving end? Is it successful? How graphic or unrealistic is it?). Maybe the question is about money—it's obvious that violent content improves television ratings and violent videogames attract teenage boys, the group that spends the most on games. This

economic incentive motivates broadcasters and game designers to continue to make this material available despite decades of evidence of its harmful effects on individuals and society. Maybe the most useful way to understand the role of violent media content in the culture is to craft a detailed, logical argument based on observation of a season's worth of prime-time television programming and a deep analysis of the top-ten best-selling games.

Every one of these solutions—regardless of how perfectly (or imperfectly) it adheres to traditional notions of social science or how neatly it fits into one of the four categories of social science theory—is offered either because of existing theory or because the answers it produces can be used to add to or develop theory. And every one of these solutions—and countless more that could have been offered—is designed to help people, us, produce a more livable, humane world. In this way, they are all social scientific.

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

Now it should be clear that mass communication theory is really mass communication *theories*, each more or less relevant to a given medium, audience, time, condition, and theorist. But this shouldn't be viewed as a problem. Mass communication theory can be personalized; it is ever-evolving; it is dynamic. What we hope to do in the following pages is to provide you with the basics: the traditions that have given us what we now view as classic theories of mass communication, some idea of the contexts in which they were developed and in which they flourished (if they did), the knowledge to decide for yourself what does and does not make sense, and some definite clues about where mass communication theory stands today. Englishman Jeremy Tunstall (1983, pp. 92–93), a keen observer of American media and American media theory, foretold the route we will travel some two decades ago: “‘Communication’ itself carries many problems. Either the ‘mass media’ or ‘communication’ would cover a dozen disciplines and raise a thousand problems. When we put the two together, the problems are confounded. Even if the field is narrowed to ‘mass media,’ it gets split into many separate media, many separate disciplines, many separate stages in the flow, and quickly you have several hundred subfields”—or to put it another way, several hundred theories.

SUMMARY

As we move ever more deeply into the ever-evolving communication revolution, we need an understanding of mass communication theory to guide our actions and decisions. This understanding recognizes that all social theory is a human construction and that it is dynamic, always changing as society, technology, and people change. This dynamism can be readily seen in the transformation of our understanding of the process of mass communication itself. New communication technologies have changed tradi-

tional notions of the mass audience, the mass communicator, and the relationships between the two. To understand this change, we rely on social science and its theories.

Social science is often controversial because it suggests causal relationships between things in the environment and people's attitudes, values, and behaviors. In the physical sciences, these relationships are often easily visible and measurable. In the study of human behavior, however, they rarely are. Human behavior is quite difficult

Thinking About Theory**WHAT'S YOUR QUESTION? WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH?**

Within four years of their 2003 inception, social networking websites were attracting 173 million visitors a month. The top three alone—MySpace, Classmates.com, and Facebook—accounted for more than 58 percent of the total. Nearly half the teens using these sites checked in at least once a day, and so popular had social networking sites become that U.S. marketers were dedicating 8 percent of their total advertising expenditures on them (all data in this box is from *Digital Marketing & Media, 2007c*). What questions do these few facts raise for you?

One obvious question is, “Who are these social networkers?” The Internet research firm comScore Networks discovered that the age group that most frequently visits these sites is people between thirty-five and fifty-four years old. Does this surprise you? Why or why not? What about their gender? Where do they access these sites? Why would middle-aged people be such heavy users of a new technology almost ritualistically identified with the young and hip? Another obvious question is, “Why do people use social networking sites?” The Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 91 percent say they use them to stay in touch with friends they regularly see; 82 percent to stay in touch with friends they rarely see; and 49 percent to make new friends (naturally, people could give more than one answer). Now what questions arise for you? Are there gender differences in why and how people use these sites? Are there age differences?

But what about a different kind of question, maybe a bit bigger in scope? How do these net-maintained or net-originated friendships differ from more traditionally (that is, face-to-face) maintained and originated friendships? Are the kinds of conversations that take place between net-friends different from those that up-close and personal friends engage in? How much “truth” happens in online friendships? How is meaning made when friends can't see facial expressions like smiles or hear voice inflection?

Maybe it isn't enough to describe these users by age and gender; maybe a more interesting question is what's going on in their lives. For example, can lonely or depressed people find comfort or relief in social networking sites? There is research linking the amount of time spent online to loneliness, depression, and alienation from friends and family (Chatterji, 2003). Are social networking sites a symptom or a cure?

And those marketers! What happens to social networking on the Internet when the sites where this activity occurs become increasingly commercialized? There have been several instances where fake “friends” have been created specifically to push a company's new product or to trash a competitor. Every major national politician is “making friends” on these sites (Williams, 2007). How might these sites differ from “real” friends' sites? Will candidates' sites attract more young people to politics? How might candidates tailor their messages on different issues for these sites? Test yourself—how many more interesting questions can you develop?

Now, what's your approach? What is the best way to answer the question or questions you find most interesting? As a postpositivist, for example, can you devise an experiment comparing the level of trust between friends who meet online and those who meet in person? Using hermeneutics you could examine the kinds of exchanges (texts) that occur between social networking friends. But maybe you want to take a critical look at the intrusion of advertising on the content of these sites. Or from a normative perspective you might want to assess how politicians' use of social networking sites changes traditional notions of the role of the media in electoral politics. But wait. What if you want to understand the kinds of exchanges that occur between social networking friends, but you want to compare different age groups, or people at different stages of their relationship? Haven't you blended postpositivism and hermeneutics? And how can you assess

the impact of advertising on the content of these sites unless you are familiar on a more or less deep level with commercial content as a text?

So, what's your question? Or should we ask, what are your *questions*? What's your approach?

Or should we ask, what are your *approaches*? And what about your own interests and values? Are you a member of a social networking site? Does that experience shape your thinking? How could it not?

to quantify, often very complex, and often goal-oriented. Social science and human behavior make a problematic fit. The situation is even further complicated because social science itself is somewhat variable—it is many different things to many different people.

Nonetheless, the systematic inquiry into mass communication relies on theories—any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience. The explanatory power of mass communication theory, however, is constantly challenged by the presence of many media, their many facets and characteristics, their constant change, an always-developing audience, and the ever-evolving nature of the societies that use them. Still, social theorists have identified three general categories of communication theory: (1) postpositivist theory (theory based on empirical observation guided by the scientific method), (2) hermeneutic theory (the study of understanding, especially by interpreting actions and texts), and (3) critical theory (theory

seeking emancipation and change in a dominant social order).

While these types of theory have a commitment to an increased understanding of the social world, they differ in their goals, their ontology (the nature of reality, what is knowable), their epistemology (how knowledge is created and expanded), and their axiology (the proper role of values in research and theory building). As such, postpositivist theory is traditionally social scientific; hermeneutic theory is based on interpretation of texts (and the product of any social interaction can serve as a text); and critical theory, in seeking change, studies the struggle—the dialectic—between a society's structure (its rules, norms, and beliefs) and its agency (how people interact in the face of that structure). Finally, there is a fourth type of mass communication theory, one that is neither representational nor seeking change: normative theory—theory designed to judge the operation of a given media system against a specific social system's norms or ideals.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How well informed are you about public affairs? Where do you get most of your information about the world around you? How often do you reflect on the relationship between keeping up with the issues of the day and your responsibilities as a citizen, or is this just something that politicians and professors talk about? Can you craft a theory of why you do not pay more attention to the news than you already do? Can you craft a theory about where democracy is heading if the best-informed citizens get their information from fake news comedy programs?
2. Can you think of any social science “findings” that you reject? What are they? On what grounds do you base your skepticism? Can you separate your personal experience with the issue from your judgment of the social scientific evidence?
3. Social scientists may have differences of opinion about the role of values in research and theory (axiology), but what about you? Where do you stand on the proper place of values in the conduct of social science?

Key Terms

grand theory
mass communication
Listserv
mediated
communication
interpersonal
communication
social scientists
causality

causal relationship
scientific method
hypothesis
empirical
third-person effect
theory
ontology
epistemology

axiology
postpositivist theory
hermeneutic theory
social hermeneutics
text
epistemic values
nonepistemic values
bracket

critical theory
structure
agency
dialectic
normative media theory